GENTRY, GAMBLER

By.....
LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

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"Pass," said Dugan laconically, laying down his cards.

"That puts me out," remarked the lean Yankee from the Cross Triangle outfit. The third man, Davies, as he called himself, rapped the table with his knuckles indifferently. He was ahead of the game and could afford to lose the pot.

There remained old man Lorry. To him Gentry looked with surprising insouciance. Having dealt the cards, the gambler was disturbed by no doubts as to Lorry's action. He would raise and promptly. Lorry had cut before the deal, it is true, but Gentry had reversed the cut adroitly, unobtrusively.

Nevertheless, to the gambler's surprise, Lorry was uncommonly slow. He vacillated mentally between caution and cupidity; his weak, red rimmed eyes shone feverishly behind the iron bound glasses, and he chewed nervously upon one end of his ragged, tobacco stained mustache. Finally he slammed his hand upon the table. Gentry arched his brows inquiringly.

"Out?" he asked, motioning toward the discard.

Old man Lorry swore abandonedly. "Naw!" he replied. "See yer twenty an' go yer a hundred better."

From the interior of his shirt he produced a roll of bills which the gambler appraised with amazement. He had not thought to find such rich pre. Lorry, conscious that he was creating a sensation, threw two bills upon the table with an air.

"Steddy, pop," cautioned Healy, proprietor of the saloon.

"Mind yer own business," responded old man Lorry sharply.

"And five hundred better," Gentry remarked softly.

"An' five hundred."

"Again."

Lorry glanced defiantly about the table. Healy had turned his back. As for the rest, startled out of their composure by this abrupt change in the complexion of the game, they watched breathlessly.

"Call yer!" exclaimed the old man, depositing the remainder of his fortune in the pot.

"Aces up an' queens!" he added, with an oath, as Gentry displayed his cards. "Better 'n my kings up an' jacks"— He broke off, staring blankly at the gambler as he calmly raked in his spoils and passed the cards to Dugan. The latter shook his head, with an air of finality.

"Nope," he said. "No more for me."

"None in mine," agreed the lean Yankee briefly, and Davies nodded assent to the judgment of the others.

Lorry shambled dispiritedly toward the bar. "Gimme some 'ski, Billy," he demanded.

Gentry arose and placed a fifty in the bartender's hands. "You can pay for the drinks out of that. I'm going to take a little walk to cool off. See you later, gentlemen." He paused on the threshold, but none answered him, and he passed on out into the infinite silent peace of the mountain night.

He walked a few steps along the apology for a road which formed the main street of the half deserted mining village, then halted suddenly.

"Old fool," he muttered impatiently, comforting himself against the thought of the wrong he had done old man Lorry. "He should have known better. Well, what's his loss is my gain. If I hadn't got it some other fellow would."

Gentry lighted a cigar, stuck his hands in his trousers pockets jauntily and retraced his steps toward Healy's. But he did not stop there. Through its open windows fragments of an argument floated to his ears, punctuated with old man Lorry's voice, bleating that he had been shorn. That was quite true, but the gambler did not wish to discuss the question with him since of necessity it would mean eventual bloodshed. He stepped quickly past the fan of light which the doorway threw across the road and began an ascent of the mountain trail. He would return ere long, when things were quieted, saddle his horse and ride on to the next camp.

The night air was warm and soothing with the balm of the pine scent. The gambler strolled beneath a high, broad arched, brilliant sky, fretted with bright stars. But from these he kept his face. His thoughts were too near to the earth for contemplation of the firmament. As he left the straggling village behind him he entered upon a great sweet solitude whose essence was in the mystery of night upon the mountains. The road wound temptingly on, a forest aisle empty, dusty, now white in the glare of the heavens, now blackly shadowed by massed pines, through whose interstices the starlight fell.

Presently the gambler came upon a little clearing in which, set at a distance back from the road and surrounded by a dilapidated picket fence, was a small cabin, vine clad. Its windows shone dimly with yellow lamplight, this although the hour was past midnight. As he stopped, puffing speculatively upon his cigar, a voice hailed him—a feminine voice, singularly rich in intonation and clear—and at that he made out a slender figure swaying upon the gate of the fence. He tossed away his smoke, removed his slouch hat and approached.

"Good evening," he said courteously.

"Howdy, stranger. Be you from Hammels, down yonder?"

Gentry failed to repress a start. The uncouthness of the words, the strong touch of dialect, was so distinctly out of keeping with what the beauty of the girl's voice had led him to expect. And, now that he could see her, there was positive refinement of feature in the face, wholly charming, upturned to him.

"Yes," he answered her.

The girl regarded him with unconcealed curiosity. "An' what might be yer name, stranger?"

"Mason," he lied without wondering why he should lie, lacking a reason.

"Oh," she sighed, with evident relief. "I didn't know—from yer style, yer know—but what yer might be Gentry."

"Who's Gentry?"

"Aw—a gambler what I heerd had come to town. Pappy went down early tonight to get in the game with him. Say, Mr. Mason, did yer see my pappy down there?"

"I don't know, really. Who"—

"Lorry," she interrupted. "Ole man Lorry they calls him, mostly. Did yer see him around?"

"Come to think of it, I did." He smiled blandly upon her to conceal a rising uneasiness.

"Was he drunk?" she continued frankly.

"No-no. I didn't notice that he was."

"He warn't gamblin' with that hound Gentry, was he?"

"No," said the hound heartily. "Gentry left town today, I hear."

"That's good!" She smiled at the gambler, shading her beautiful eyes with a deep fringe of upcurled lashes. "He'll only come home drunk, then," she added pensively. "I don't mind that. Never had to manage a man, did yer, stranger?"

"Only myself," he laughed.

"Then yer don't know nothin' about it—the trouble, I mean. Pappy's an ole fool. He don't know no more about playin' poker 'n a tenderfoot, an' he thinks he knows it all. He—he"— She hesitated.

"Well?" he encouraged her.

"Aw—nothin', only he made a strike a little while ago. It warn't much of a strike, only a couple of thousand, an' he promised to send me back east—to the home folks, you know—next week."

"And?" said Gentry softly.

"That was the money he took to gamble with," she laughed, a trifle harshly. "Said he'd send me back in style—with his winnin's. Well, so long's Gentry ain't there I reckon I may get a chance to get some book learnin', after all. If I can keep him home till next week Goin' already, stranger?"

"Yes; I must hit the trail early tomorrow, Miss Lorry."

"Waal, so long. If yer see the ole man start him along home, will yer? Thanks, an' good night to yer, Mr. Mason."

* * * * * * *

Some distance down the trail the gambler stumbled over the prostrate form of a man. With something of a strong presentiment Gentry turned the body over and lit a match to see the face.

It was old man Lorry, hopelessly intoxicated, sleeping the dead sleep of alcohol.

"There's most of my fifty," remarked the gambler grimly. "It's like throwing good money after bad. I'm a darned fool."

To prove his assertion he took from his wallet the bills of which he had robbed the miner and stuffed them in the latter's pockets. Then he helped him to his feet, meaning to see him home. To his wonder Gentry found that the man, once afoot, was able to walk after a fashion. He lurched along unsteadily, but made progress toward his cabin.

The gambler followed him to the clearing, stepping noiselessly, then turned and went back for his horse and his last glimpse of Healy's.

Bright Benny.

"What a fine boy Benny is getting to be!" remarked Mr. Bloobumper's mother-in-law, who was taking dinner with Bloobumper.

"Yes, indeed," replied Bloobumper proudly. "He's a regular logician too. He'll ask questions and deduct conclusions in a masterly manner. He's inherited his father's brain power," added Bloobumper modestly.

A few moments later the conversation turned upon Mormonism, and Benny, in his search for knowledge, asked, "Papa, what is a Mormon?"

"A Mormon, Benny, is a man who marries more than one wife."

"Then you are a Mormon, ain't you, papa?" asked Benny, anxious to display the deductive powers which his father had commended.

"I a Mormon, Benny! Why, how in the world did you get such an idea in your head as that?"

"Why, I heard you tell Mr. Spratts yesterday that you had married all your wife's family."

"Mrs. Bloobumper," said that gentleman, turning to his wife, "I think Benny had better be sent to bed. He's been up quite late enough."

Revenged.

He was asking the old man for his daughter in marriage. He was talking tremblingly, hesitatingly, as you read in story books. Now came the old man's turn to speak, and as he began his face was white with passion and his voice shook with excitement.

"You want to marry my daughter?" he said. "Ah! Twenty years ago your father crippled me in a business deal and I swore to be revenged, and now my time has come."

He paused for breath, and the aspirant for the maiden's hand was about to beat a hasty retreat in the face of supposed defeat, when the father broke forth again:

"Yes, sir; I swore to be revenged, and I'll now strike the father through the son. Want my daughter, eh? Well, take her, and may she prove as expensive to you as she has to me."

The old man dropped into his chair, worn out with the excitement of his plot, and the young man fainted.

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